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From Idea to Screen, the Making of Residuum

by

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## ABSTRACT

This project is designed to give an inside look at taking an idea and turning it into a film. In this project I combine research with practical experience to give an in depth look at the process I undertook while making my film *Residuum*. Part one of this project lays out research, knowledge, and thought process behind my decision making. Part two of this project is a finished short film that shows the culmination, and combination of skills required to combine my artistic and scholarly side. These two parts allow an in depth view of my project from a kernel of an idea to a finished piece of art.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### *A love affair with film*

I have had a long and tumultuous love affair with film. At times it has lifted me up, other times it has brought me to the depths of despair, and even more so it has scared me beyond all comprehension. At no time however has film abandoned me or left my thoughts, for it is all that moves me and inspires me. It is through this love affair that I came to write this thesis. I decided long ago sitting in a dark movie theatre watching the larger-than-life images flicker on the screen that this is what I wanted to do. To be able to transport people to different worlds, to show them that there is something else that awaits besides the tedium of day-to-day life. I wanted to be able to give back some of what film has given me.

When I sat down with Richard Jennings to discuss *Residuum*, one of the first things we talked about were goals that he and I both had for the film. I had a deadline of four weeks to shoot and edit the film, so one of the first goals was to determine a length for the film that would allow me to shoot and edit in that time frame. No longer than fifteen minutes is what we determined to be a feasible length. Richard then asked who my influences were and I told him that directors like Alfred Hitchcock, David Fincher,

Antoine Fuqua, Tobe Hooper, Martin Scorsese, and Sergei Eisenstien were some of the directors I admire. We also talked about the story for the movie.

Story-telling was also another goal that Richard and I had set for the film. We wanted the story to be strong and interesting with an emphasis on moving the story forward. Richard was acting as producer and had come up with a story that he wanted me to tell. The basic shell of the story was about a woman living out different moments in her life right before she dies. He also wanted this to be a type of psychological thriller, much in the vein of Hitchcock. I was assigned a scriptwriter and together we sat down and took the shell of the story and started trying to hammer out details of the characters and the story itself. As we did this I decided to look back at a couple of Hitchcock films. Even though I am a fan and know many of his works I chose to look back at a couple of his earlier and less famous films. The one that struck me most was *The Lodger*, a silent film from 1927. It tells the story of Mrs. Bunting, a landlady that believes her lodger may be the notorious serial killer the Avenger. But in spite of all the evidence to the contrary pointing to the fact that he is the avenger the lodger turns out in fact to be telling the truth. He is not the Avenger, but searching for the Avenger because his sister was one of his victims and he is in fact the wealthy business man he claims to be. Very early in his career Alfred Hitchcock was sent to Germany to assistant direct *The Prude's Fall*. It was to be shot at UFA (Universum-Film Atkien Gesellschaft), where he was able to learn from German director F.W. Murnau. "Murnau was generous to Hitchcock, answering whatever questions he asked, explaining what he was doing, inviting him to watch the filming, and encouraging his career...According to Hitchcock: "From Murnau I learned how to tell a story without words"" (Chandler 50). This revelation led me in a direction I

had not thought of before. We could minimize the dialogue and concentrate more on the story through pictures.

So I sat down with the scriptwriter and we began to concentrate on cutting down on the dialogue when we could. Also I told him my revelation about creating a movie where nothing is quite as it seems. By this time we had decided how we would complete the shell of the story we had been given. We would tell the story of Sara Glass. Sara was a woman that had suffered tragedy in her life. Losing her parents in a fire, as well as losing her boyfriend in the same way had taken its toll on her. Sara finds herself remembering the events that led up to her being in the mental institution where she now resides. These events however may have not occurred in the same chronological order that Sara is remembering them. We would tell this story showing the audience different stages of Sara's life. When the audience meets Sara she is a young woman. Through the course of the movie she meets a young girl, and an old woman. These characters represent Sara in these different stages of her life. However, the audience would not know that they were seeing these different stages until the end of the film, when it is finally revealed that all three of these characters are actually Sara. One of the problems with this approach that we discovered was how to clue in the audience that it was Sara without giving the ending away. We discussed giving the audience clues by maybe having a sound or some other device that would repeat throughout the film. These clues would depend heavily on how we were going to present the film to the audience.

One of the first things I decided to tackle was what kind of woman was Sara? How did she end up in a mental institution? Why was she unable to overcome the tragedies in her life? What made her tick? In his book Psychology at the Movies, Skip Dine Young



talks about archetypes and their place in the movies. He is more interested in Carl Jung's archetypal theory and what it emphasizes as than in Freud. "Archetypes manifest themselves as familiar characters, such as the Mother, the Father, the Wise Man, The Hero, and So on" (Young 28). He also talks about symbolism in film. "We can choose to explore symbols or we can ignore them... Symbols are not just a means of uncovering disturbing material from our unconscious: instead, they are full of possibility for personal growth and greater understanding of the cosmos" (Young 28). When I read Dine's book it occurred to me that Sara was just an ordinary woman who had a very difficult life, a life that anyone who had misfortune befall them could suffer. It also became something an audience could easily relate to. Everyone would recognize a young woman who was trying to make her way in the world when fate intervened and sent her careening down a path she had never expected. We also decided there should be a symbol that connected the three different versions of Sara. This symbol would also help move the story forward. Sara would recognize the symbol and this recognition makes her start to question the "reality" of what is happening around her. We decided that it should be something simple that people would recognize but which might not immediately allow them to put the pieces together; we decided on a necklace.

## Chapter 2

### *A shift in philosophy*

I sat down with the scriptwriter and we talked about the symbols and who Sara was and the stages of life we would represent her in. We also discussed what it might be like in Sara's mind as she is remembering the events. "The human mind lies by remembering everything subjectively. We remember selectively, forgetting some events, exaggerating others, and even fabricating new or different events" (Indick 104). This proved to be a very interesting focal point, for we now realized that we could play with the different scenes and interpret them in different ways. For me it was a moment of clarity. I realized that I could interpret the different scenes in different ways without being dishonest to the audience or the story. This moment of clarity, if you will, sent me towards another path. I had been approaching the telling of this story as a thriller or maybe even a horror movie. However what I realized is that we were telling a ghost story. Not a ghost story in the typical sense, with things that go bump in the night, but in the sense that no matter what you do you cannot escape yourself. No matter how far or how fast you run you will still be there. The only thing that was still unclear was the path that Sara would take to tell this story. This realization came with a price however. The scriptwriter and I were having very different Ideas on how the script and the imagery should be written. He was still writing typical horror movie or thriller type stuff complete with gory images, jump scares, and violence. To me however the movie had taken on a more subtle tone and now

was more surreal than scary. I wanted to take a trip inside the mind of Sara and invite the audience to accompany me; the scriptwriter did not feel the same.

One of the other goals Richard and I had discussed when we first talked about this project was about not being too ambitious. By that I mean that we did not want to take chances that had a low percentage of working and might throw our schedule off. Some of the effects that the scriptwriter had come up with would have done just that. He had moved away from telling the story and instead was trying to use effects to wow people. One of the other problems we had was that I did not want this story to be about violence and bloodshed, and I was worried because some of the images he was proposing, like Sara picking up a picture of her “father” and seeing him covered in blood and badly burned, did not convey the new meaning of the story and would shift the focus away from Sara and her journey.

I was more interested in what would happen if a person lost their self-consciousness and, if in essence all the moments of what is referred to in William Indicke’s book Psycho Thrillers as the “creative self-consciousness” such as “near death experiences, religious epiphanies, falling in love, and discovering a worthy cause to dedicate one’s life to...moments in which we create meaning in our own existence” (Indicke 107) were stripped away. This in turn led me to two other movies that deal with the issue of what happens to someone when they lose their self and their mind, and memories start to become blurred. The first movie I looked at was *Memento*, directed by Christopher Nolan. It deals with a man, Leonard Shelby, whose wife is killed and during her murder he receives a gunshot to the head which causes him to suffer severe retrograde amnesia. As a result he can no longer make new memories; he must rely on physical clues such as

tattoos, and Polaroid pictures to tell him who he is. The other is the *Notebook*, Directed by Nick Cassavetes; it is the story of a man who every day reads the story of Allie Hamilton and Noah Calhoun to a woman in a nursing home. He tells of their love, their separation, their reunion and their life after. Through the course of the movie it is revealed that the woman is Allie Hamilton and the man reading is Noah Calhoun. Only Allie now has Alzheimer's and cannot remember her life with Noah. On the surface these might seem like two disparate movies, but to me they were both about the struggle to keep memories alive. In both situations the men were trying not only to sustain what little life they had left after losing their wives but they were also fighting for the love that they both felt for them.

The other thing that struck me about these movies was the differences between the "truth" and "reality." In his work Reality Transformed, Irving Singer points out that there is a marked difference in what appears to be real and what is actually real. "We often recognize the difference between how things seem to be and how they really are. The fact a straight stick looks bent when it stands in water has intrigued even the most primitive observers...and if our vision can be illusory, should we not say the same about all other types of sensation?" (Singer 15). In both movies the audience cannot truly be sure of what is "real" because we are only getting the story from one point of view. However that being said the only truth that matters in these movies is what the characters believe to be "real." It then became even clearer that the only "reality" that mattered was that of Sara's. This after all was her story and her fight to save what little of herself that she had left. It was at this point that I decided the path for Sara. I wanted her to be like Leonard and realize that her memories were being taken from her and that she had to

fight to keep them, while at the same time be like Noah and keep reliving the past in order to hold onto it. Now that Sara's path had been chosen, the script needed to be changed to reflect the new direction.

Once again I found myself at odds with the screenwriter. He believed that we could keep the bloody imagery and the violence and tell the story I wanted to tell. Now to be fair to the screenwriter, he was not trying to use these images to make some kind of slasher movie or torture porn exploitation piece. It came down to a difference in philosophies. In his book Terror and Everyday Life, Jonathon Crane addressed the shift that gradually occurred in the Horror genre.

In this extraordinary shift, older forms of horrific imagery and storytelling have vanished. Horror films that rely on the hallowed legends of the past, spiced with just a hint of spurious violence, are gone...And films that assayed the meaning of dread, delving deep into the mysterious psychology of madness and evil...have faded from view as well. In their place, we have films that reject the stories of older horror tales in preference for inordinately simple narratives that seem to exist solely to showcase the latest leap forward in stomach churning special effects. (Crane 2)

This shift did not occur overnight however. It happened gradually over time. As audiences became more jaded and cynical due to cultural changes that were happening around them, they became disinterested in the monsters of the past. Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Wolfman were relegated back to the books and stories they came from. In 1960 however the monster made a dramatic shift. When *Psycho* was released the entire landscape of the horror film changed. "Paul Wells credits Hitchcock with giving the horror genre 'the moment when the monster, as a metaphor, or myth, is conflated with the reality of the modern world'" (Maddrey 48). It is this modernization of the monster that is still reflected in today's modern horror world. A world populated with human

killers who have no remorse or compassion and whose only charge is to kill, sometimes without motivation. This was not the world I wanted Sara to live in. Even though her parents died in a fire that she started, her story was about her psychological trauma and how it affected her. Sara was not Norman Bates or Hannibal Lecter, she was a victim. Her crime was one of youth and negligence, not malice and contempt.

However to portray this world we would have to lose the blood and the violence. As a matter of personal reflection I am a hardcore horror movie fan. I, like the screenwriter was indoctrinated in the world of the modern horror film. As a matter of fact one of my favorite movies ever made is *Halloween*, Directed by John Carpenter. It is the story of Michael Myers, who is introduced to us as a boy left at home with his sister on Halloween. Instead of taking him trick-or-treating like she is supposed to his sister sends him out so she can be alone with her boyfriend. Through a window Michael sees that his sister has abandoned him. He sneaks into the house and takes a knife from downstairs, puts on his Halloween mask, goes upstairs and kills his sister. Then we fast forward several years and Michael escapes from the mental institution he was sentenced to. Now grown he returns home on Halloween and focuses on a babysitter that reminds him of his sister. I give this background, because I feel it necessary to point out that the removal of blood and violence from Sara's life was a stylistic and storytelling choice.

## Chapter 3

### *Inspiration comes when you least expect it*

Ironically it was from the man who made what many consider to be one of the most brutal films ever made, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and from that film itself that I was able to find my inspiration to portray Sara's world. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, to be known hereafter as *Chainsaw*, is a movie about a family of cannibals that preys on a group of stranded motorists who break down near their home. As I said earlier, I told Richard that Tobe Hooper was one of my main influences; it was in my research on him and his methods that I found something quite interesting about *Chainsaw*. In Eaten Alive at a Chainsaw Massacre, John Muir was breaking down the movies of Hooper and was talking about *Chainsaw*,

Not surprisingly, the first shot of the film following the credits is yet another image that reveals how the ordered universe has become topsy turvy. An armadillo lies upside down on a hot asphalt highway, its dead arms reaching towards the sky...Not long after the shot of the armadillo, a drunk is seen lying in the same position as the roadkill...the drunk's face is upside down in the frame...Since the birth of the medium, movies have possessed a thing called decorum; a specific manner of viewing things and people, and a specific methodology in storytelling...Yet Hooper challenges such notions immediately, undercutting that sense of decorum, and film structure too. (Muir 56)

With this interpretation of the movie in mind, I watched *Chainsaw* again. I soon realized that what makes this film so horrifying and brutal was not necessarily the brutality that exists in the movie but it was the world itself that the characters found

themselves inhabiting that was so brutal. It was the energy and the pacing and the editing technique that Hooper used that really told the story. I also found a quote from Tobe Hooper that helped shape the new direction of Sara's world. "I don't believe in using too much graphic violence, although I've done it. It's better to be suggestive and allow the viewer to fill in the blanks in their minds" (BrainyQuote). This really resonated with me because it reinforced the fact that everything in the story should serve to move the story forward and should reinforce what the story is about. This is what he had done with *Chainsaw*. Even though it is filled with onscreen violence and blood, it is not these things he relies upon to tell the story. They were only devices that were used to support the story. The story was about the characters and what they were experiencing, and their own personal hell. The violence was from necessity not from exploitation.

With this new realization in mind I looked again at the story I was trying to tell. Even though I had decided to tell this story without blood and violence I was inspired by Hooper's use of images to set up his story. I knew that it would be through images, and relying on the audience to fill in the blanks that I would be able to tell Sara's story. With this in mind I chose to use an image of a burning house that would be inserted into the film. To reinforce this image newspaper articles would be used to show that Sara had started the fire that killed her parents. Even though it is unclear what started the fire that killed her boyfriend, Sara blames herself. Instead of showing the audience images of badly burned or bloody people, I would allow them to make those images for themselves and delve as far into the abyss as they saw fit. In this case it was not up to me to supply the horror; I gave that task to the audience. In shifting the focus to the audience it



became apparent that the audience should do more than just accompany Sara on this journey. But then the question became what role should they play?

This question intrigued me, because up until this point I had not really considered the audience as an integral part of this movie. To be sure I was not ignoring the audience but I was more focused on the aesthetics and getting the movie across to them. However with Sara's path now before me I realized that the only way to get this movie across to the audience was to give them a path to travel as well. Now that Sara's path had been determined, it was the audience's turn. Their role in the movie had to be settled upon as well. Were they to be merely observers? Voyeurs if you will, glimpsing inside the mind of Sara. Were they just an audience? Experiencing the movie as an interested viewer but not integral to the story. Or were they a character? A missing character, a character that can be found in the audience and if so would they accept the responsibility of being that character?

The choice became clear that the audience should be a missing character. In this way they would become part of the story, and could in effect tell their own version of the story. They could come up with their own "reality" and could decide their own version of the "truth" from Sara. This was the final piece of the puzzle. This decision ultimately shaped the final direction of the movie. It was now incumbent upon the audience that they experience the story not only as Sara's experience, but as their own as well. In doing so they would become the story tellers. In essence they were the narrators of this story, not just voyeurs looking into someone else's world from a darkened room that isolated them and at the same time insulated them against what was transpiring before them.

However in giving this task to the audience I realized that the film had moved from the horror or thriller genre into the world of the surreal. A world that I must confess I was not too familiar with as a filmmaker. Again I turned to research. In Figures of Desire, Linda Williams talks about the theory and analysis of surrealist film. In the opening chapter of her book Williams quotes Pierre Reverdy regarding his emphasis on the image of poetry. “The image is a pure creation of the mind. It is not born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two or more less distant realities...One can create...a powerful image, new to the mind, by bringing together two distant realities whose relationship the mind alone had grasped” (Williams 3). Williams also points out that the surrealists “delighted in the differences between the film image and the “reality” it supposedly reflects...In their efforts to reveal both the seductive power and fundamental falseness of the image, Surrealist artists have often employed mirrors in their works” (Williams 143). I decided that the first image of Sara we would see was her reflection in the mirror as she was getting ready for her day. This image on a subconscious level would let the audience know that we are only seeing a reflection of Sara and not the true Sara herself.

## Chapter 4

### *Reality versus “Reality”*

I also decided that to add to the surrealism of the film we would use color to contrast “reality” from memory. The first film that came to mind when I thought of using color as a device was obviously *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming. The story of Dorothy’s journey from her home in Kansas to Oz and back begins in black and white, which sets the dreary life and day to day doldrums that Dorothy experiences; however when she lands in Oz the color signifies that excitement and wonder of the adventure that Dorothy wants. However by the end Dorothy decides that all of that color does not always represent happiness and it is home that she truly longs for. Although this was not to be Sara’s journey, it was the use of color and black and white to represent two different “realities” that struck a chord with me. I decided to make all of Sara’s memories black and white and her “reality” color. Then I decided to take it a step further and as Sara’s descent into the abyss was completed I would make certain characters black and white while leaving the rest of the scene in color. With the audience’s role now in focus this choice seemed logical. It allowed me to place the audience in Sara’s shoes. Up until now everything had been fairly straightforward. The present was in color and the past was in black and white, this departure would not only signify Sara’s coming unraveled, it would in turn make the audience question their assumption of what they had been seeing. In this way much like Hooper in *Chainsaw*, I would make this world that seemed to have

an order to it, become topsy-turvy. The audience would then begin to question their own “truths” and “realities” they like Sara would be unable to distinguish what was “real” and what was not.

However after more research I thought that it would be better not to make this a true surrealist film. I like the ideas and the images that surrealism manifests but I kept coming back to my own realization that this was a ghost story. So I decided to keep some of the imagery and ideals of surrealism while at the same time delving back into my own horror background for the framework to support these ideals. With that in mind the film was shot with the idea that we were shooting a horror movie. I talked with my cinematographer and we decided that we would tell the story using conventions of the horror movie genre. One convention we decided on was “the Doppelganger or the second self, the mirror image, the Other who is Oneself” (Jones 103). Since it had been decided that Sara would be represented at different stages in her life, we decided that she should interact with those different stages. Once again, like in surrealism, the mirror had come up as an image. So to reinforce this image and place the audience in the middle of the story we shot Sara seeing herself with a series of point of view shots. These shots would put the audience in Sara’s perspective when looking at different versions of herself, at different stages of her life. Also “an encounter with the double portends the death of the self” (Jones 103). This tied back into the fact, that the original shell of the story that Richard presented me with has Sara die at the end of the movie.

However it was more than just camera angles and storytelling conventions from horror that intrigued me. One of the biggest things in ghost stories is the use of sound to produce an otherworldly atmosphere. This use of sound would let the audience know

what is natural and what is supernatural. Thinking about all of these things combined, the image, sound, music, editing, and even dialogue, brought me back to Sergei Eisenstein and his theory about synesthesia. Synaesthesia is a medical condition that affects the way people sense stimuli, in other words when they hear a certain sound, they in turn perceive that sound as a color. Eisenstein developed his own definition of synaesthesia. He “states that his process of association of sense-impressions involves emotion. Here synaesthesia is the ability to unite in one whole a variety of feelings gathered from different sources through different sense organs” (Robertson 142). In the movie *Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein shows us a mastery of synaesthesia in a sequence known as the “Odessa Steps.” As the soldiers advance through the chaos of the revolution pushing the revolutionaries back, the music like the action is chaotic and frantic but when we see a mother with a baby carriage on the steps the music changes to a more maudlin and subdued melody. However the action around her remains chaotic. The mother is then shot but the music remains the same, and as the mother dies she falls against the carriage. The baby carriage then rolls down the steps. The imagery remains bloody and violent as the carriage descends the steps through the chaos. This disparity in music and image made me realize that this is what I needed to do in order to tell Sara’s story. I needed to use all facets of the film and manipulate them in order to achieve my goal of making the audience an integral part of the film. Only by making them feel what Sara felt while at the same time bringing their own experiences and their own story to this film would I be successful. Even the title needed to have meaning that had resonance with the story. I decided on *Residuum* for the title, a word that means residue. After all, the only thing Sara had left to prove she was alive is a residue of the life that she led.

## Chapter 5

### *Reflections*

After the final edit was made I began to reflect back on this project. I realized that for the first time in my making of a film I had pigeonholed myself, without even realizing it. I, like the screenwriter, had become bogged down in what I believed that a certain genre demands, be it horror, comedy, action, or even drama. In today's modern cinema the audience is very aware when it comes to film. They understand the ins and outs of films and filmmaking. This allows the audience to critique the films they see as they never have before. This in turn puts pressure on the filmmaker, who knows that there are certain expectations from an audience very savvy and aware of what they want to see. I realized that was what I was trying to do. I was trying to give the audience exactly what they expected. However I had lost myself in that process. But it was through my disagreements with the screenwriter and my research that I realized that all of the filmmakers who have influenced me do one thing first, and as selfish as it sounds, it is the only way that you can truly be happy with a film. They make the film for *themselves* first, they think about the story they want to tell, then they decide the best way to tell it, and only then do they decide how to include the audience in the process. Martin Scorsese once said, "when I'm making a film, I'm the audience." I never truly understood what he meant until I started trying to tell Sara's story. In telling her story I realized that like all the directors I respect, I had to please myself first. For only in pleasing yourself first can

it become clear how you can please others. That is after all what this is all about, the one dirty little secret that a lot of filmmakers do not want to share. Everyone who undertakes the making of a film wants it to be enjoyed by an audience. No matter if it is a short film, an independent film, or a major Hollywood production, it is all about making something that others will enjoy. After all that is the only reason to argue with screenwriters, spend hours on set shooting different angles, and fretting over every little last detail when putting the movie together. In the end we are storytellers. Instead of a pen we use a camera, but the goal of the finished product is the same. It is to be enjoyed, to be debated, and to be passed around from one person to another. Whether or not this will happen with my movie is yet to be seen. However there is one thing that came from this movie that will affect the rest of my life as an artist as I move forward, and I would like to thank Sara for that. I realize that my struggle to tell her story allowed me to see that like Sara, I too had become lost. I had lost myself as an artist. In the end it was Sara's reconciliation of the fact that she had been lost that allowed her to stop fighting and let death make her whole again. I too recognized that I had become fragmented, I like Sara was fighting with myself, but it was through my reconciliation of this truth that allowed me to find my own voice again. A voice I will never lose again.

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